



## A Micro Business Leadership Development Framework

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## **A Micro Business Leadership Development Framework**

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### **Abstract**

Small businesses are crucial for regional and national economic development (Thorpe et al., 2009), specifically contributing towards productivity for long-term economic growth (BEISC, 2019). Notwithstanding the level of government funded support programmes focused on the small business (Gray and Jones, 2016), there is a void of leadership development training. Recent UK statistics underscore the high rate of failure of new businesses in the first five years (ONS, 2018) and point out lack of leadership skills as a key contributor (CMI, 2015). Given research and indeed practitioner evidence of leadership development programmes for small business owner/managers (Hutchinson 2017), this paper focuses on business and leader benefits of collaboration between University and industry in delivering a leadership programme for micro business owner/managers in the Creative Industries. Adapting the Hutchinson (2017) Lead2Grow model, the authors report early research findings of a Design Thinking led learning approach to develop the leadership skills of micro business owner/managers.

**Keywords:** Leadership Development, Micro Business, Creative Industries, University Collaboration, Design Thinking

**Track:** Entrepreneurship (Mini Track: Micro-business)

**Word Count:** 2263

## **1.0 Introduction**

Small businesses are recognised as the backbone of the economy (Gray and Jones, 2016; Turner and Endres, 2017) and account for more than 99% of the United Kingdom (UK) business population. While, micro businesses account for 95% of the business population (FSB, 2019), most studies focused on leadership development disregard the small business context (Vecchio, 2003; Reinl and Kelliher, 2014; Armstrong and Page, 2015), with the exception of a limited number of studies (Peel, 2008; Leitch et al., 2013; Hutchinson, 2017). Considering the high failure rate of new businesses in the first 5 years (ONS, 2018) attributed to lack of leadership skills (CMI, 2015), it is surprising that research of leadership development in the small business context is still lacking (Hutchinson 2017). This paper provides new understanding of the business and leader benefits of collaboration between University and industry in delivering a leadership programme for micro business owner/managers. Adapting the Hutchinson (2017) Lead2Grow model, this paper specifically reports on the early research findings of a Design Thinking (DT) led learning approach to develop the leadership skills of micro business owner/managers in the Creative Industries (CI).

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Leadership Development for Micro Business Owner/Managers***

Although it is clear leadership is important to all businesses regardless of size (Heslin and Keating, 2017), leadership is considered especially crucial for the growth and success of small businesses (Gupta et al., 2004; Kempster and Cope, 2010). Small businesses, particularly the micro business sector, are largely under-represented within literature and industry training programmes regarding leadership development (Smith and Peters, 2006; Leskiw and Singh, 2007), with existing management literature focusing on larger SMEs (Morrison, 2003; Henley and Norbury, 2011; Mirocha et al. 2013; Garavan et al. 2015). Various reasons attribute to this. First and foremost, it is not necessarily that they are considered less important, but more so, related to restrictions on the small business to engage with training programmes. Leaders of micro businesses tend to approach external growth with ambiguity (Devins et al., 2005) as they do not realise its importance or relevance (Jones, 2011; Barnes et al., 2015; Hutchinson, 2017). Furthermore, micro businesses are constrained with the multi-disciplinary role they have to play (Fuller-Love, 2006) to keep the business operating. As a result, they are constrained in resources (e.g. time), meaning they are less likely to engage in training programmes which remove them from daily operation requirements (Peel, 2008; Garavan et al., 2015). This is particularly true within the context of the CI (CLP, 2002), yet there are no specific leadership programmes targeted at the CI or an understanding within literature of how they can best develop leadership capacity. This research thus aims to contribute to the emerging knowledge within literature to enhance understanding of leadership development methods of the small business sector.

### ***2.2 The Role of HEI in Developing Business Leaders***

The world of business faces increasing change and sustainability challenges (Brown et al., 2010), in which leaders require a new understanding of complex issues and approaches (Powell, 2008). Higher Education Institutions' (HEI's) are urged to take a lead role in developing change leaders (Scott et al., 2012) to respond to this environment and drive impactful change (Kotter, 2011). Existing research focused on leadership development and that stems from HEI's, demonstrates an increase in effective leadership and enhanced ability for the leaders of small businesses to implement change for growth (Gordon et al., 2012; Hutchinson, 2017). Information and knowledge are recognised as key drivers of change (McKinsey, 2006) and essential to stay competitive (Huggins et al., 2008). For micro

businesses, HEI's are recognised as a key source of information, knowledge and skill enhancement (Rast et al., 2012; Corzo, 2015). Yet, there is a compromise across the UK and more specifically in Northern Ireland (NI) of the lack of engagement between HEI's and the business community (NCUB, 2015). This is despite political pressures that research should contribute to commercial and social impact (ESRC, 2019). Given the CI focus within this study and the need to focus on problem solving to effectively lead (Powell, 2008) it is anticipated that a HEI-led programme can provide the industry with the knowledge to find innovative solutions, thus encouraging economic growth (Isaken and Karlsen, 2010; Corzo, 2015). Furthermore, existing small business leadership development programmes which have emerged from HEI's have demonstrated high economic impact considering the knowledge exchange and enhancement (Barnes et al., 2015; Hutchinson, 2017).

### ***2.3 Micro Business and Learning by Design Thinking***

It is recognised that small business owner/managers learn best by 'doing'. Therefore, Action Learning is a renowned approach in existing leadership development programmes for small businesses, focusing on specific problems in individual business contexts (Jones et al., 2014; Barnes et al., 2015; Hutchinson, 2017). Action Learning, facilitated within a group setting, requires delegates to draw upon the questioning of others when there are no clear-cut solutions to a problem (Barnes et al., 2015). However, considering 95% of the business sector are micro in size with many having zero employees, this is not a feasible process to apply in an everyday business environment as many of them will not always be able to draw on appropriate experiences. It is argued that in situations where entrepreneurial leaders of small businesses find themselves unable to draw on previous experiences, creative thinking is important (Reckhenrich et al., 2009). Therefore, for this study focused on working with CI business owner/managers, DT was identified as a problem-solving approach (Geissdoefer et al., 2016) that would potentially encourage delegates to open up their mind and think in the perspectives of others while solving business problems (Interaction Design, 2020). Furthermore, DT encourages an informal learning environment which is further considered appropriate for the small business owner/manager (Perren and Grant, 2001; Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Kempster, 2006; Barnes et al., 2015). Existing research focusing on DT in an entrepreneurial learning environment, to date, has mostly centred within the University-student setting (Nielsen and Stovang, 2015; Huq and Gilbert, 2017; Kremel and Wetter, 2019; Sarooghi et al., 2019). However, given there is a strong link between using design approaches and enhancing productivity (Design Council, 2018) and business growth (Deloitte, 2016), the appropriateness of using and examining the effects of a DT approach within this exploratory study is highlighted.

DT was first coined by Peter Rowe (1987) articulating a procedural process of creative problem solving with a more intuitive creative approach. Cross (1982) uses a phrase "designerly ways of knowing" which tease out this indicative designer mindset which is solution-focused towards solving ill-defined problems. However, DT is inherently complex, and has been oversimplified into singular techniques for business strategy application. While many researchers have identified this issue, challenging the very idea of DT itself, a sophisticated critique is presented by Kimbell (2011) explaining that further critical rethinking and perhaps terminology review is required. For the purpose of this research, DT is considered a specifically selected combination of creative thinking approaches, relative to contextual problems, working through an iterative problem-solving framework. One framework relevant to this study is the evolved Double Diamond method (Design Council, 2019), which recently integrated leadership as a core consideration extending the original published model (2004).

## ***2.4 Leadership Development in the Creative Industries***

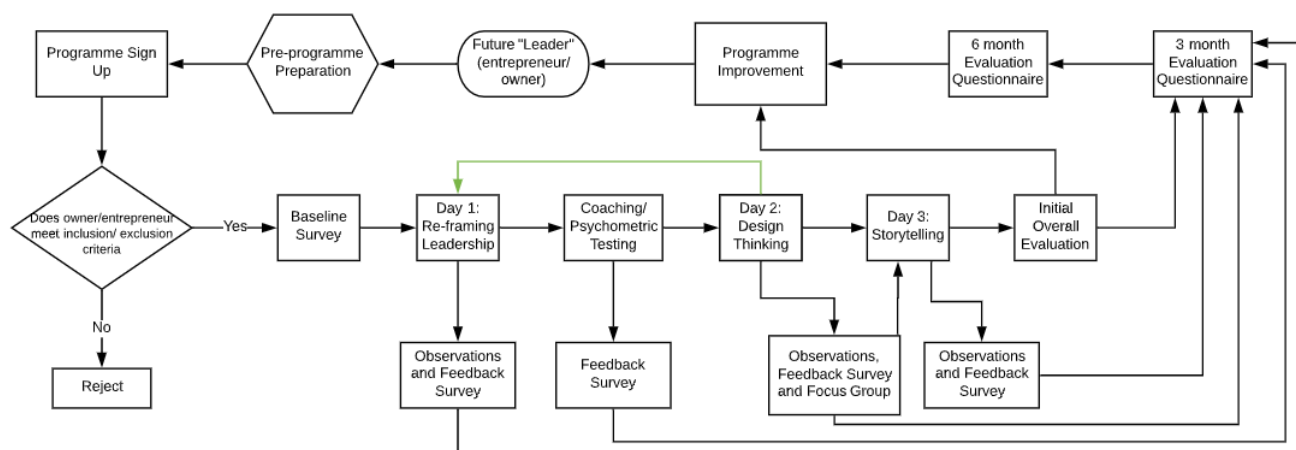
The CI, a key sector with high economic growth potential (DCMS, 2016), has more freelancers than any other industry (CIF, 2017) and a history of high rate of business failure (Hotho and Champion, 2011). CI businesses are considered to pose their own unique set of challenges in comparison to other industries, such as increased Intellectual Property challenges and as such a unique approach to leadership development is required. Research demonstrates that lack of leadership is a key reason for business failure within the first three years of start-up (CMI 2015). Furthermore, reports (Bazalgette Review, 2017; PwC, 2015) highlight lack of leadership within the CI, yet there is a lack of understanding of what these specific challenges are within the literature or how these are overcome. Therefore, this research aims to begin to provide an understanding of the leadership challenges within the CI and determine how DT acts as a learning methodology. It will do this through the delivery of a leadership programme, utilising creative learning techniques in which it is anticipated creatives CI creatives learn (CLP, 2002).

## **3.0 Methodology**

The programme design was informed by a literature review and an exploratory stage of research to include six DT expert interviews and participation and facilitation in best practice DT workshops. By doing so, this exploratory stage aimed to gather deep understanding of research phenomena and how DT is currently applied to current business situations, determine if DT is appropriate and then apply DT in context to the programme (Robertson et al., 2012). The programme incorporated a distinct DT learning approach spanning a nine-month period (three-month delivery and six month evaluation) targeting owner/managers, freelancers and creative artists. The DT learning approach incorporated in the programme design included creative problem-solving techniques from design theory providing optional ways to enable convergent and divergent thinking within challenging business environments. This training encouraged change beyond the role of the leader, to all in the company where ‘Design Culturing’ as defined by Julier et al (2019) has a role in response to world issues, which can be extrapolated to business (Magee, 2020).

The aim of the programme is to help leaders acquire the knowledge and skills that will enhance their personal and professional development resulting in real business impact. In doing so, the programme sought to provide participants with a creative problem-solving toolkit to utilise in their unique business context to enable a proactive response to problems in a fast, turbulent and complex environment.

The research adopted a mixed methodological approach and the evidence presented in this paper draws upon the findings from focus groups and surveys collected throughout the study to measure the impact of the leadership model on business change. Figure 1 presents the methodological structure of the programme.



**Figure 1: Programme Design and Structure**

\*Note: The green connector represents a reflective and personalised approach in response to DT and coaching, demonstrating the iterative mechanisms of the programme. This iterative approach is in line with DT principles.

### 3.1 Sampling (Programme Recruitment)

This leadership programme adopted a five stage sample selection process whereby delegates: were the owner/manager; demonstrated a desire for growth (NESTA, 2009; UKCES, 2015); situated in the North West of NI; micro in size (less than 10 employees); and operating within the CI.

Given that half of CI businesses are self-employed (CCS, 2015), it was not possible to access a comprehensive list of creative businesses to target. Furthermore, according to NCUB (2015), communication between local businesses (including SME's) and academic institutes are usually initiated due to an already established relationship between the two parties. It was important to use existing relationships to engage local businesses on a training programme which is university-led. In this case, local support organisations were utilised to target and recruit participants.

### 3.2 Program Design and Delivery

The HEI research team (authors) together co-developed a leadership development model and delivered to 30 businesses across three cohorts in NI which began in October 2019 and will finish in March 2020 with further evaluations until September 2020. Structure and content were consistent across all three cohorts and delivered by expert facilitators (Devins et al., 2005). The structure of the programme is detailed in Table 1.

Activity	Focus
Baseline Survey	Leadership development programmes should be needs led, flexible and experiential, ensuring content is purposefully aligned with leader's culture (Storr and Trenched, 2009). As such, baseline surveys were used to identify skills base of participants and form the foundation the programme (Holt, 2011). The baseline will also be used to compare to evaluation as leaders had to rate their competency in key leadership areas.
Workshop 1	This workshop defined the narrative of leadership for the micro business owner/manager, drawing on personal and professional dimensions of their

	life (Craig and Snooks, 2014). It incorporated a key focus on ‘re-framing leadership’ for the micro business leader who often find it irrelevant (Jones, 2011; Barnes et al., 2015; Hutchinson, 2017) and focused on self-awareness and recognising and developing empathy. Delegates drew upon real personal and professional learning events. This day also introduced the ‘empathy’ phase of the DT process.
Individual Coaching	Each delegate engaged in a short one to one coaching session with a trained coach to increase their self-awareness.
Workshop 2	Workshop two focused on problem solving and contextual learning underpinned by DT tools and knowledge. This day of the programme was led by two of the authors, one of which is an expert in design, allowing participants to enhance knowledge regarding the value of design and understand and reflect on how they can apply design principles to complex problems within their business. Overall, incorporating Day 1 and Day 2 of the programme, the participants are expected to take learnings and apply them in a way that demonstrates an enhanced design culture within the business.
Workshop 3	Centred around telling the story of leadership purpose using emerging technologies. (Note: workshop is adjacent to the overall programme as an external project and does not form a part of data collection).
Overall Evaluation	Participants completed an initial overall evaluation form at the end of programme delivery which aimed to gather initial knowledge enhancement and satisfaction of participants (Grohmann and Kauffeld, 2013).
Three and six month evaluations	Three and Six month evaluations were carried out in order to measure impact of outcomes as a result of participating on the programme.

**Table 1: Programme Structure**

### ***3.3 Data Collection and Analysis (Programme Evaluation)***

This study draws upon focus groups and surveys which were used to note, analyse and interpret initial perceptions and outcomes of the programme (Saunders et al., 2015). From the 30 targeted participants, data for 20 has been completed (third cohort is currently underway), including:

- A Pre-test baseline questionnaire was distributed to 20 delegates before the programme began to ensure needs of delegates were understood and to inform the programme (Holt, 2011), adapted from Hutchinson (2017).
- Post-test questionnaires were distributed at the end of every session (Day 1: Coaching, Day 2: DT workshops) to measure specific evaluation of tools and techniques.
- An overall initial post-evaluation survey to measure training and learning knowledge gained (Kirkpatrick, 1994)
- Focus group to distil the values of the DT methods for each individual. This information relates to potential business change and impact.

Further data will be gathered including an additional cohort of 10 companies. Subsequently for the total cohort of 30 companies, a longitudinal study involving a three and six month evaluative questionnaire will be conducted to measure behavioural change and business results/impact (Kirkpatrick, 1994; Grohmann and Kauffeld, 2013). NVivo (qualitative data analysis software) was used to thematically

analyse the focus groups improving transparency (Welsh, 2002). Additionally, SPSS (statistical analysis software) will be used to comparatively analyse surveys.

#### 4.0 Preliminary Findings

At this stage of the data collection, pre-test, post-test, overall evaluation surveys, and focus group feedback have been completed by participants on the first two cohorts (n= 20). Although some early key findings have emerged from this data regarding impact, most data at this stage relates to satisfaction and knowledge enhancement. Early indicators suggest:

Topic	Initial findings	Literature context
Leadership Perceptions (Day 1: Re-framing leadership)	<p>Within the focus groups there was a consensus that the delegates perceptions of leadership had changed or ‘shifted’:</p> <p>“It is way more complicated than I thought it was” (PB4)</p> <p>“Before I wasn’t aware...it has definitely made me more aware” (PB9)</p> <p>“The perception for me of a leader was...the manager, the boy at the top, but from what we have done, leadership is everywhere” (PB5)</p> <p>“The first session helped me flesh out my idea of what a leader is” (PA4)</p>	<p>The small business leader does not realise the importance nor relevance of leadership (Jones, 2011; Barnes et al., 2015; Hutchinson, 2017). Sometimes they even regard it as negative based on past experiences of leadership (Jones, 2011). However, it is understood that if leaders have a positive attitude and embrace leadership that leadership can be effectively implemented (Garavan et al., 2015), thus contributing towards achieving business and economic impact.</p>
Skills Development (Day 2: DT)	<p>A key theme emerged in that 70% of delegates immediately felt that they are better equipped to make more informed decisions and apply creative problem solving to their business through DT methods:</p> <p>“It will help with encouraging problem-solving issues within my business” (PA9)</p> <p>“Understanding how to process problems and ideas” (PA7)</p> <p>“It allowed me to visualise the business issues and allows me to solve the problems” (PB5)</p>	<p>Enhancement of leadership skills, specifically focusing on problem solving and decision are key to effectively leading a creative business (Chattoraj and Shanam, 2015; Powell, 2008).</p>
(Day 1: Re-framing leadership and Exec coaching)	<p>80% of delegates suggested that they had enhanced their self-awareness through the programme, which mainly attributed to the executive coaching session led from Day 1 of the programme:</p>	<p>Being self-aware is key for embedding learning for owner/managers (Ashford and DeRue, 2012; Heslin and Keating, 2017) and allow them</p>



(Day 1: Re-framing Leadership, Day 2: DT and Executive Coaching)	<p>“A better understanding of why I react in certain ways to certain situations” (PA9)</p> <p>“I am carrying a lot of stuff around in my head and by openly sharing it, makes you more aware” (PB8)</p> <p>“Awareness of my difficulty in ‘telling my story’” (PA6)</p> <p>At the outset of the empathy session in day 1, many participants were uncomfortable with the empathy activities. However, given the link with literature, it is an unsurprising finding that 70% have initially indicated that they have enhanced their empathetic understanding or ability an enhancement in empathy which is applicable to their business:</p> <p>“Empathy is very important” (PA1)</p> <p>“Understanding ... how I impact on others” (PA8)</p> <p>“Being able to be aware” (PB9)</p> <p>“Putting myself in other people’s shoes and being able to read a different mindset”</p>	<p>to be open to new ideas and reflect on experiences from different angles. Furthermore, self-awareness can aid better informed decision making. For example, Hayes (2018) suggests that leaders that are emotionally intelligent are self-aware and so can pace themselves into someone else’s shoes before making decisions.</p> <p>Empathy is the underlying construct behind effective decision making (Chattoraj and Shabnam, 2015; Hayes, 2018), helping to be more productive by saving time resources. This is because empathy aids leaders to better relate to clients and teams (Marques and Dhiman, 2017; Hayes, 2018) for deeper understanding.</p>
Business Impact	<p>While all delegates documented key learnings from the programme they would implement their business (e.g. “creative thinking”, “believing in myself”) 55% indicated they had already began to make changes (before the programme was complete) or planned imminent change, for business growth and development:</p> <p>“I have been using the empathy map every week to think and re-plan my business model” (PA2)</p> <p>“I have identified areas for growth in myself and to get more out of the team” (PB4)</p> <p>“I will apply learning in the way I interact with my clients – empathy” (PA3)</p> <p>The research team have also received informal feedback from participants which would indicate that impact as a result of the programme is happening. For example, one participant who had</p>	<p>An incremental implicit (growth) mindset as opposed to an entity implicit (fixed) mindset is seen to be more effective in allowing leaders to perceive their outcomes by reflecting on their strategies and also helps people to view challenges as opportunities rather than having a fixed mindset where a leader believed they can’t change their personal attributes (Heslin and Keating, 2017).</p> <p>Adult learning is demonstrated through behaviour change (Beer and Hsue, 1972), which for small business owner/managers can enable business growth (Jones, 2011). However, he effort to implement change often</p>

	zero employees is now in the process of employing three! (PB10)	fails due to changes being managed as opposed to lead (Kotter, 1996), thus businesses within the 21st century need to have a focus on developing leadership and executing creative solutions (Tanner, 2003).
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**Table 2: Preliminary Findings**

## **5.0 Limitations of the study**

The period of longitudinal analysis is limited to 6 months, for this particular phase of research, due to funding constraints. Other researchers (Gordon et al., 2012) measure impact of programmes across 5 years suggesting changes can still occur beyond 6 months.

## **6.0 Summary and Paper Development**

The longitudinal study aims to define which leadership coaching approaches and DT methods are most successful in enabling change and if there are recommended patterns that work in SME development for CI. This hopes to guide companies in how to begin the ‘design culturing’ process within leadership. This developmental paper presents the early findings of research into the leadership development of micro business leaders in the CI sector from 3 programmes delivered in a major region of the UK, of which further findings will be presented at the conference.

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